

Digital Connection

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Traction on a Slippery Slope:

Some Thoughts on Promoting Your Ideas

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Lots of people have great ideas, but ideas are a dime a dozen. What separates the best ideas from the rest is implementation. Take the example of Tesla's Wardencllyffe Tower project to distribute power wirelessly. It might have worked, but he couldn't drum up enough interest to get it fully funded. What if all he needed was a better PR team?

While Nikola Tesla is said to have been quite the showman, and the reasons for his tower project's failure both diverse and manifold, it illustrates the point that it is an awful lot harder to convince others to buy into your idea than it is to come up with it in the first place. And as radio amateurs, we often face similar situations: I need to drum up interest in <whatever>. This month, we'll take a look at some ideas on how to promote your ideas.



Figure 1: Nicola Tesla's Wardencllyffe Tower, located in Shoreham, NY. Tesla's dream of delivering power wirelessly never came to fruition, partly because his idea couldn't get enough 'traction'. The tower is long gone, but its foundation is visible at 40°56'50.3"N, 72°53'53.7"W. [Image from Wikipedia]

Digital data networks are a perfect case in point: From HamWAN <hamwan.org> to TARPn, building a network with just a single node is not very exciting. I don't think you can even call it a network unless there are three stations. So once you have developed your idea into something that actually works, the next step is finding a few like-minded souls to join you and build

something nominally useful, or at least interesting.

Last time I wrote about a laser data link, and although I was surprised to hear from a few folks about extending the idea further, I have serious doubts about building a data network based on lasers. I don't plan to spend any additional time to promote the concept, and so it ends.



Figure 2: The TARPn demonstration booth at the Stone Mountain Hamfest near Atlanta. A live demo of the network and its features, using actual RF, precluded many of the 'is this workable' questions and led directly to 'how can I get involved'. Hamfests and club meetings are excellent places to find your customers.

TARPn <tarpn.org>, on the other hand, is a project I do believe in and, as the expanding network in North Carolina demonstrates, it is developing what can be called traction. In this usage, it means an idea (or product) that generates interest in itself, and attracts others to it. So, for something like TARPn or HamWAN to grow – even though there's no profit motive here – the organization needs to attract customers. Yep, exactly the same as if this were a business: You have an innovative, useful and attractive product, but to be successful, you need customers.

I'm writing about amateur radio data networks, but it could be most anything: your club needs members; your hamfest needs vendors and attendees; your DXpedition needs sponsors, and so on. Even into the business world, the same basic ideas all still apply. How do you drum up some business? This is often the hardest part of business, and where most entrepreneurs fail: Great inventor, terrible salesman. More on traction later.

The first step to getting some traction is to have a useful and attractive product, like TARPn. It arguably only appeals to a very small subset of hams, and there are some physical constraints as well in that interested parties must be close enough for simplex radio communications on VHF or above, both adding to the challenge. I won't go into what TARPn does (I've written before about it, or see the website) but will assert that in most areas there are enough hams that would find this fun, interesting and useful enough to establish a viable network. The trick, then, is finding them...or getting them to find you.

The second step is to ensure that all (or nearly so) of the information needed to participate (or buy, or...) is available somewhere. In the 21st century, that generally means a website. Have the resources available for anyone to peruse and make their own decision as to whether this is something they want to do, and if the vision of the organization is something they might believe in. TARPn, for example, has among its visions the idea that all data travels exclusively by ham radio and that stations wishing to use the network must build a node to access it. If you can't abide by that, then you need to find something else to do.

Third, you need a project champion. In the Raleigh, NC area that role is filled by Tadd Torborg KA2DEW, one of the founders of TARPn and an old hand in the Packet Radio universe. But to grow the network in Atlanta (for instance), Tadd can't be expected to travel seven hours each way on a regular basis. This means a local project champion is required, someone willing, able and even enthusiastic in promoting the network. They also need to have the technical knowledge to build and troubleshoot everything. Such a role is not for the faint of heart, nor for those who can't dedicate the time to doing a good job of this.

The project champion is the most important aspect of getting traction. We usually don't have the luxury of choosing volunteers for the position, but success or failure does hinge directly on this individual. Some will be naturals,

others may need some coaching. But this is a make-or-break role.

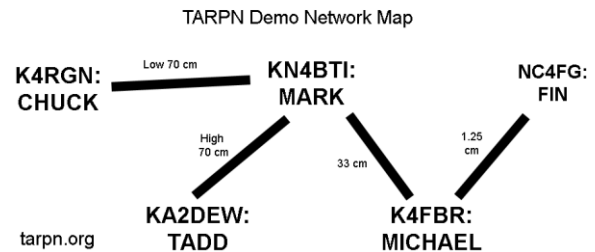


Figure 3: The demonstration network map. A live demonstration is arguably the best way to show off the network. If you use radios as we did, be sure to use low power and attenuators.

Fourth, figure out who your customer is (and where they are). For TARPn, the obvious people are licensed amateurs. Some may be interested in emergency communications (EmComm), others may enjoy developing an interactive community (chat network), still others may enjoy the technical challenges. Think long and hard about this, because if you mis-identify your customers, you'll be preaching to the wrong crowd, an exercise in frustration.

Last, recruit some followers. We believe the critical mass for a new TARPn network is five nodes. That means you need to find four others, each of which are at the very least in simplex range of one other, to assemble a network. Sure, more is better, but let's use baby steps here: four others is challenge enough.

Here in the Northern suburbs of Atlanta, I've found four others interested...but we're not in simplex range. We're fairly close to each other, but some terrain gets in our way. Actually, two of the fellows near Kennesaw probably are in range of each other, but I can only influence their getting together to try it in small ways. Of course, the real answer is to find other participants who are in simplex range.

One way to do this is to attend local hamfests. In November Tadd and I attended the Stone Mountain Hamfest in Lawrenceville, GA to promote the idea of TARPn. Rather than simply put up a couple of banners, Tadd additionally brought his 5-node demonstration network. Using actual radios (on low power) and ground-plane antennas (along with some hefty attenuators – nobody wants that much RF around), this is a 100% real network. Take one of the node boxes a few miles away and everything remains operational (after removing the attenuators, at least).

Then there are local clubs. Every club wants someone to give a presentation, right? A PowerPoint® might be one of the first things you think of, but an actual live demo blows that out of the water. With things like banners, displays and presentations, the first questions are along the lines of ‘does it really work?’ and ‘how can this be built’. By showing a fully-built network, those questions go away and you instead start with ‘how can I get involved?’.

Hamfests draw attendees from a fairly large area, which might be at odds with the need to be in simplex range, but do enjoy wide exposure to the local amateur community. It is exhausting, being on your feet all day, talking and talking until you lose your voice. Anyone who has worked a trade show knows what I mean. But you do have the most interesting conversations. And, you can find out more about clubs in your area.



Figure 4: Here's a great product looking for 'traction'. The developer/inventor/owner's target audience includes those who visit hamfests, and he has a website. But if he is serious about marketing these gizmos, he has to put some effort into getting more traction. I'd never heard of these before, have you?

To get a more local focus, bringing your demo (and, if you must, a presentation) to a local club can be effective. These are hams that all live nearby (or at least near each other), and since they're a captive audience, your message will be heard. Where a hamfest is a broad searchlight, a club demo is a laser. My local club is quite active and meeting slots are filled until next year, but by then I'll have built my own demo network (or have convinced Tadd to come out again...) and will be ready to try phase three of the recruiting process.

Three you say? Yes. I think it important to mention what didn't work so far, at least not for me. You may have a different outcome.

Waiting for people to come find me really didn't work well at all. The last years have been really unusual, in that we had this pandemic thingie, so going out to meet actual people

wasn't on the approved list. Nor did they seek me out.

What also didn't work was posting to the web – the groups.io TARPEN mail reflector, for example – that I was interested in building a network here. I had a few responses, sure, but much like a hamfest audience, folks were just out of range.

Not being from the Atlanta area – I spent the first 55 years of my life in Northern New Jersey – I'm at a disadvantage in that I don't know many local hams. Joining the club was one way to remedy that, but it's not as easy for me as for some others. Time will tell. I think what will be most effective is to visit several clubs. Besides demonstrating what the network does and displaying the hardware, delivering the 'spiel' several times should help me sharpen the message. I learned a lot attending the hamfest with Tadd: not the technical aspects of the system, but the topics that hams are interested in hearing about. EmComm was popular, but just as popular were folks dismissing packet as old-fashioned or obsolete.

The demo station helped – each had its own monitor, keyboard and mouse, and it was not much of an intellectual leap to understand that these stations could just as easily span a county as it spans the hamfest tables. Watching chat messages appear in seconds from four hops away was enlightening.

For next time, handouts directing people to the website would have helped. We had the volume turned up on a few radios, not very loud but definitely audible, and the packet noises definitely attracted attention to the table. Hearing packets fly from one end of the network to the other was kinda neat.

A lighted TARPEN sign was placed atop a tall plastic shelving unit, pointed so that it was easily visible from the main entrance. We also had 3-foot wide banners hung from the shelves, but certainly could have accommodated a single, wider one. While one table would have been OK, having two gave us room to spread out, accommodated the larger monitors easily, and just made everything look less cluttered.

Chairs so visitors could sit down at a keyboard were very popular. Some just wanted to sit, which was OK with us. Our tables were not against a wall, but the folks at the next table across the inside aisle were happy to have some extra space: We were mostly out in the attendee aisle, but left a small gap so we could get behind the tables for water and other supplies.

So a few parting words on traction: The mechanics of attracting customers is the easy part, but just showing up isn't enough. You need

to enthusiastically engage your audience with an attractive message. Many conventional ways of finding customers won't work (or work well) in this kind of situation. In business, a web presence is essential: Search engines, ads, marketing, email blasts are all good for a business, but not so much for a system like TARP. But speaking engagements, hamfests ('trade shows'), social media presence, writing (for your club's newsletter?), event participation (field day?) all can help you get some traction in the community, particularly the local ham community. You really only need one of these methods in order to find success, but going after several is a good idea.

Once you get past the initial effort and move to a functioning network, you still need to recruit new participants, but your fellow networkers can help take on the challenge. Everyone knows someone, and if they're in simplex range, good chance they'll be interested. Or at least listen to the pitch. A functioning network is a great advertisement, since folks can get on the air and actually hear it. Oh, they'll have to build a TARP node to actually work it, but that's the attraction.

Will any of this work? Maybe, maybe not. There are no guarantees of success, no easy answers. But if you know someone who is in marketing, or runs their own business, they might have some useful insights. But the bottom line is that the local champion is the key, and that person needs to put in the effort to get the result. Get your face in front of other hams, and get them excited to start something.

If you have any thoughts or ideas for this kind of thing, please drop me a line. I sure can use the help, and besides that it's always nice to hear from you.

Until next time, 73 de N2IRZ.

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